

Clarks Island

DHR P.211

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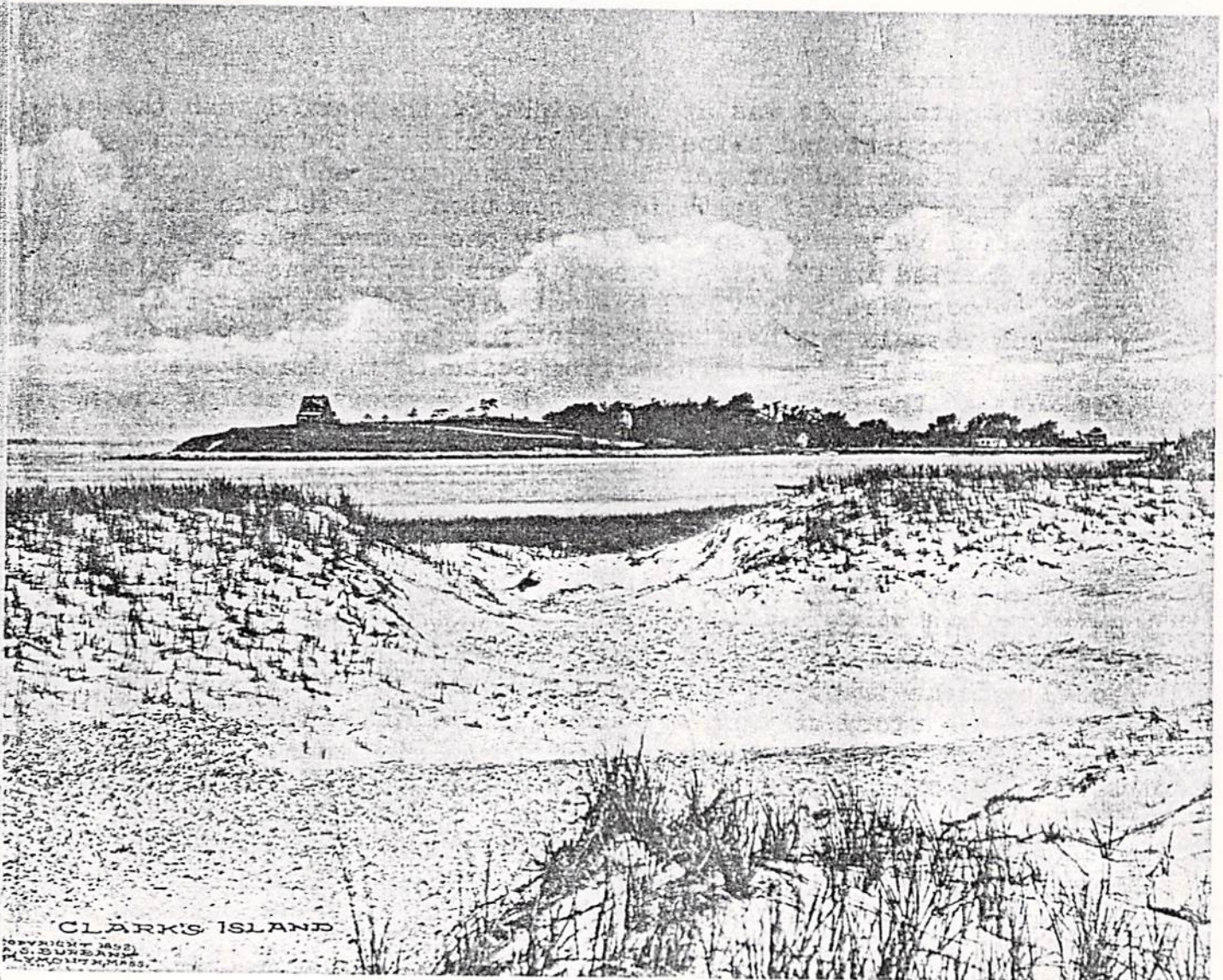
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**REFERENCE  
NOT TO BE TAKEN  
FROM THE ROOM**

A HISTORY OF THE GURNET,  
SAQUISH AND CLARK'S ISLAND

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## INTRODUCTION

A History of the Gurnet, Saquish and Clark's Island by Albert Franklin Pierce is a superb piece of folk literature. In 1969, Captain A. F. "Allie" Pierce, 92 years of Plymouth, is one of the last of the old-time shell backs that sailed before the mast. He has written a history compiled largely from memory and oral tradition and has preserved anecdotes in local history that might easily have been forgotten or perhaps never remembered. Men like him will never be seen again. He is one of the last remnants of the old-time sailors who have been shouldered into history by the less rugged ways of the modern world they helped to create. Each year, the ranks of those who followed the sea in the tradition of Melville's Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg of Moby Dick fame or Richard Henry Dana, author of Two Years Before The Mast dwindle. We are therefore most fortunate to have among us still, in this historically unique environment of Plymouth, a seaman who is, to a great extent, a part of Plymouth's maritime past and whose history will add to preserving much of the area's lore.

Captain Pierce was born on April 11, 1877 in Chiltonville, Massachusetts. This was at the height of the period when the stately square-rigged ships still predominated the maritime scene and steam had not yet replaced the winds and sea currents as the major means of seafaring locomotion. He went to sea while still very young and spent only one summer ashore before he was married in 1913. At twenty years old, he was the skipper of the sloop Gladys Lee. He has not only been the master of numerous vessels but has built ships for seventy-five years which have sailed from harbors from Scituate to the Cape and as far west as the Connecticut River. He remembers trawling in the spring until the first of May and then setting nets for mackerel in the summers. His clear mind is filled with seafaring lore of which the following are examples:

He recalls the "big able vessel" Cora McKay of Provincetown, skippered by Captain McKay. While fishing off the Virgin Rocks on the Grand Banks, the Cora McKay slipped her anchor in a mighty gale and was lost without a trace (except her mooring buoys) of the twenty-five Provincetown men aboard her. He related the story of Captain Wadsworth out of Duxbury, "a hard-bitten sailor." His wife was aboard his ship and about to give birth to a child when the ship was becalmed in the Indian Ocean and could not reach port. A son was born, aptly named Seaborn Wadsworth, and the mother died in childbirth. Desiring to bury his wife in the soil of her native Duxbury, Captain Wadsworth placed her body in a cask of brandy and so

preserved her as to avoid the necessity of a sea burial. However, quite naturally, Wadsworth did not respond in exactly the same way to his crew. When a certain sailor died at sea, Mr. Pierce recalled the simple service performed on the quarterdeck as handed down in oral tradition to him by his neighbor on Saquish, the Captain's son, Seaborn Wadsworth. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, if God don't take him, the devil must," and so the body was committed, ever so briefly, to spend eternity in the deep. The spirit and temper of the forecastle is herein demonstrated.

Captain Pierce remembers seeing the ship Tom Lawson, the only seven-masted schooner ever built, loaded with oil in New York and bound out for Liverpool, England. It was Friday, the 13th of December, 1907. The ship's master, superstitious as many men are whose lives depend upon the fates that the elements have in store, refused to sail. A new captain was requisitioned by the ship's owners who would not suffer one day's loss of profits for the sake of superstition. The ship was lost at sea with all hands off the Scilly Islands between the Azores and England not long after leaving port. Although these seamen had the uncanny ability to pick their way through storm and fog by dead reckoning, the sounding lead or a mystic sense of smell still, even for seamen endowed with such a sixth sense, there were safer ways to make a living. Gales, collisions, shoals, and dangerous lee shores took a heavy toll of vessels and thier crews.

Mr. Pierce, in conversation, has clearly demonstrated the maritime vitality of Plymouth in the early 19th century. He spoke of over sixty vessels bound out of Plymouth for the Grand Banks "registering a total of \$98,000 in the year 1800 for customs house receipts. When they took the wharves away," mused Captain Pierce, "they ruined Plymouth."

Captain Pierce is related to many notables in Plymouth history. Although painted in the darkest shades by George Willison in Saints and Strangers, John Pierce held the patent of the old colony in 1622 and helped finance the Pilgrims while he was in England. Captain Pierce is also a relative of Abraham Pierce who owned the first cattle in the colony. He is a descendant of United States President, Franklin Pierce, and his grandfather, Branch Pierce, deer hunted each autumn for many years with Senator Daniel Webster at Long Pond, Massachusetts. Albert Franklin Pierce is, in short, a most fascinating man and we are delighted to have his history in our Library's collection at Pilgrim Hall and his map of Clark's Island, subdivided by land holdings and titles, given to the Pilgrim Society in 1952.

L. D. Geller  
Director, Pilgrim Society  
Plymouth, Mass.

## A HISTORY OF THE GURNET, SAQUISH AND CLARK'S ISLAND

The Gurnet was visited by Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, in the spring of 1004 and at that time, was covered with woods. The spot so charmed him, he exclaimed, "On this beautiful spot I should like to fix my dwelling!" Soon after he was wounded in a skirmish with the Indians and shortly died and was buried on the Gurnet.

The Gurnet and Plymouth were visited by Martin Pring in the year 1603 and by Suer de Mants in 1605 with Champlain as pilot. He made a map which shows Saquish as an island and Brown's Bank the same as now. The Gurnet was granted in 1694 to John Doty, John Nelson and Samuel Lucas.

Sir Edmond Andros, as governor of New England, granted to Plymouth the Gurnet, Saquish and Clark's Island in 1688-1689. The fort on the Gurnet was built in 1776 by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury and had a company of sixty men under Capt. William Weston. The lighthouse was built in 1768, the first twin lighthouse on the coast. It remained a twin lighthouse until 1924 when Massachusetts ceded same to the Federal Government in 1790. It was destroyed by fire in July of 1801 and rebuilt in 1803. The first lighthouse keeper was a Mrs. Thomas. The fort was called Fort Andrew.

During the War of 1812, a few shots were exchanged with the British frigate "Niger," which sent boats and crews to burn the fishing vessels at Plymouth. The fort fired on the frigate and the return shot from the frigate put a ball through the lighthouse, the only lighthouse on the coast to be hit by enemy fire. The British, however, turned back.

The Gurnet contains about 27 acres of good soil. The name is derived from the gurnet-fish, which is found on the coast of Devonshire, England.

Saquish was granted to the town of Plymouth in 1638-39. Plymouth, in 1690, granted it to Ephraim and George Morton. In the earliest records, Saquish is called "Sagaquas" by the Indians, which means, "The place of many clams." It has an area of about seven acres of upland.

Edward Bangs was one of the early settlers and he conveyed the land to Manasah Kenton, who in turn conveyed these lands to his son-in-law, Ephraim Morton, whose heirs sold same to Elisha Doten in 1725. In 1741, Doten sold out to Robert Bartlett, and in 1742, Bartlett transferred title to Benjamin Hanks, who lived

there for about four years before selling out to Saraus LeBaron in 1746. Hanks left Saquish and went west. His great-grandson Abraham Lincoln, was born in a log cabin in Kentucky, sixty-three years after he left Saquish.

The Burgesses owned Saquish from 1850 to 1860. Mr. Burgess came ashore from lobstering one day, only to find surveyers at work and upon questioning them, he was informed that the Government was about to build a fort, which they did. It had a well sixty-five feet deep and had a gun mounted on each of the four mounds of the fort.

After the Government abandoned the fort, a fisherman and his wife lived in the underground quarters, and the wife, having the evening meal prepared, went out to call her husband, only to find upon their return that the entire roof had caved in.

Mrs. Caroline Keefe Harney was born there on August 24, 1873, and at that time her father was Sargeant Keefe of Fort Standish.

The Burgesses had a negro servant and upon her death, was buried near a large rock on the east side of Austin Lowell's lot, near the road.

The house now owned by George Harney was the guard-house of the fort and the house now owned by the Hamilton's, was the barracks which had been moved down from the fort.

About the nineties, in the month of November, a big fleet of trawlers came into Saquish for a harbor and to torch herring for bait. Some of the men hired Joe Thurston's place and in large kettles, tried out the cod-livers which they had brought ashore.

The schoolhouse where the children from Clark's Island, Saquish and the Gurnet attended school was the middle one of the three, this side of the Gurnet. Near by, the site where the old Coast Guard Station once stood, there is buried in the sand, the wreck of an old Viking ship. It is just like the one now on exhibition in Pilgrim Hall. The hull washed out once and J. Russell Harlow and I saw it. It is completely covered now and there is no record of it to be found.

There have been several wrecks on Saquish Beach and there is one near the Hall cottage, buried in the sand. It had come from the Carolinas loaded with corn and it dragged ashore in a storm. I have heard my grandfather tell of boating corn up to town.

Saquish was an island at high water before the ninety-eight

storm, and lobster boats at that time, could go into the Gurnet Creek at high water. That storm filled it in and made it a part of the Gurnet.

Below the bank, near the old Parker Hall house, there was a small pond and ice was cut for home use in the winter.

When I first came to Saquish, approximately 70 years ago, the whole place was cleared land and one could pick to his content all the wild strawberries he wanted.

After the government gave up the fort, Delano and Keith purchased same. Mr. Keith came down to survey, but was at a loss to find anything to start from. The deed started from the old slippery elm tree which could not be found and no one knew where it was. Upon returning from lobstering one day, Mr. Keith asked me if I knew where the slippery elm was located and after dinner, with the aid of a shovel, I was able to locate the stump of the slippery elm, which had blown down in the ninety-eight storm and had rotted away, had it not been for this, the place could not have been run out. Before the ninety-eight storm, there were two cranberry bogs on Saquish but the storm filled them in and they were killed by the salt water.

The Indian village was evidently located in the vicinity of where I used to have my garden, the lots now owned by Harry Hunt. I have dug down post-holes, four feet deep and found shells and also many arrow-heads.

The main road across Saquish is named Hank's Avenue, after Nancy Hanks, who lived there about 1746.

About 1912, a Mr. Chase who came from Springfield, Mass., owned Saquish Beach, and at that time built a large house with a wharf and a small steamer made runs from Plymouth. The house, complete with well and a bathroom, had a beautiful large lawn with rosebushes, the loam for the grounds was carted down from the fort by Elisha Sampson by horse and tip-cart.

There came a big storm and washed the whole place away, as well as the Murphy house on a near-by lot and the only place that really held was the Dixon house, although in the sand-dunes was anchored firmly on posts, and after the storm, one could walk under the house.

At the time of the storm, the tide was so high that Peiffer's Point was all under water and their cellar on the Point filled with water. The tide came up to the cellar door at my place.

The channel to Clark's Island, at that time, came between Saquish and the Island about half way between and one winter, a

big ice filed formed between Saquish and the Island and blocked the whole place and opened a new channel, where the present one is now.

About 1920, there were three fish traps off Saquish. Harry Hunt had one and had a large power boat to carry fish to Boston.

Mr. Zenas Crowell made the blue prints for Saquish and laid out the lots for Sam Burgess. The lots sold for \$75.00 each.

During the ninety-eight storm, the sloop "Venus" out of Gloucester came ashore in the cove inside and the crew went into the old farm-house to stay until they could get the vessel off. Mr. Burgess came down from Duxbury and ordered them out and they then went over to Joe Thurston's place to stay. The next winter, when no one was living on Saquish, the farm-house was broken into again and everything smashed up, including dishes and furniture.

Mr. Homer, an antique dealer from New York owned the big house, formerly the barracks and in viewing pieces of china from the farm-house which had been broken, stated that if they were whole, he would have given \$500.00 apiece for several of them. The old farm-house had a fireplace in every room with a huge open one in the kitchen and under the stairs, a place to smoke ham and bacon.

When I first came to Saquish, Nate Crowell and myself picked cockles. We had a large car to keep them in and a vessel came once a week to pick up our catch, usually taking 150 buckets at 75 cents a bucket. Shortly, I built a boat and went lobstering. At that time, Joe Thurston, Charles Briggs and J. R. Harlow were lobstering from Saquish. John Hurley and Kelley and Burt Russell soon arrived to live at Saquish.

One winter, a vessel loaded with lumber went aground on Brown's Bank but was able to free itself and came into the inside cove of Saquish. Before the underwriters were able to come down, Hurley and Peiffer got enough lumber to build each of themselves a house.

After Briggs left Saquish, Mr. Ranney bought his place and then I built a house for him and this is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. John Pascoe.



CLARK'S ISLAND

On the 8th of December 1620, 18 men in the shallop from the Mayflower reached the island in a storm of rain and snow and on the 10th, the sabbath day, rested, and on the 11th, sounded the harbor and found it suitable for shipping.

On the 23rd of February, 1687, Mr. Knight, Governor-In-Chief of New England, granted to Nathaniel Clark, the Island, containing about 86 acres. In 1689, a committee in Plymouth was formed and took over Clark's Island from Clark.

In 1690, it was sold to Samuel Lucas, Elkanah Watson and George Morton and after a few years, it passed into the Watson family. It was a source of revenue to Plymouth for timber and there was a salt works there.

The Watsons cleared the land and raised hay and were noted for their turnips. There were four who owned the island: Mort, Ed, Jim and Nathan Watson. They were boat builders and built some fine boats. Captain Nate was captain of the largest sailing yacht, the three-masted "Constellation." The two brothers, Al and John, were among the well-known fishing captains and owners.

The Island was deeded to the Watson's, free of all encumbrances which they thought included taxes, but the selectmen



of Plymouth would not agree to this.

The old farm-house was built about 1690.

The last ones to live in the farm-house were Dan Burgess and his sister. He had a smoking cancer on his upper lip and very seldom left Saquish. They had Joe Thurston bring food to them. They were afraid of being poisoned. After they left, the house was occupied by Frank Glass and Chet Morse. It was then bought by Duffy for the Marshfield Gun Club to be used for week-end parties. After a group started down to Saquish one Saturday night and got stuck part way down, they turned back disgusted. It was then left to Duffy to do what he wanted to with the property. It remained empty for some time. Nate Sampson removed doors and windows and the weather came in and ruined it on the inside. The hurricanes ripped off the roof and the sides caved in and it gradually disappeared, piece by piece, until there was none of it left. Some of it went into other buildings. There were boards two feet wide in the floors.

Frank Davis bought the old Cross Rip Lightship from the Government and brought it to Saquish. He put it in the creek on the inside, and at high water the rum-runners would come in at night and unload. Boats would then come from Duxbury to get it. It was set afire one fourth of July and burned to the water-line.

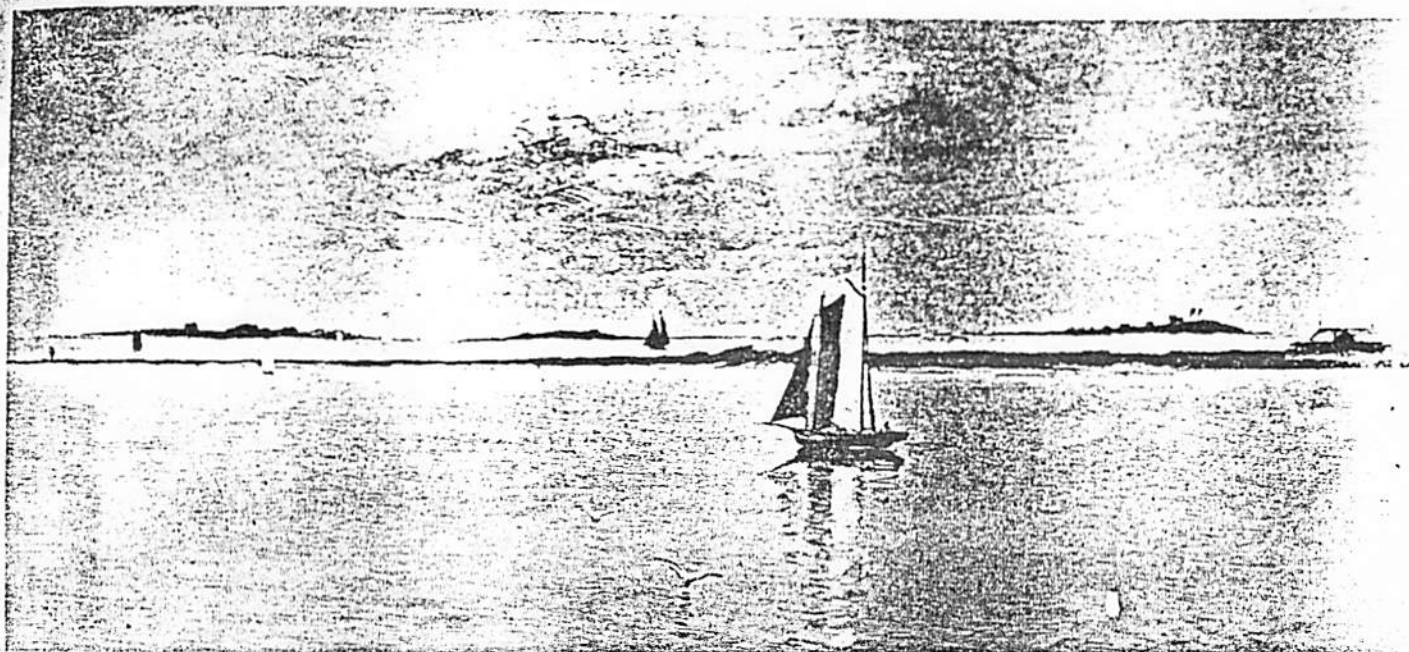
The Watson's owned and skippered some of the finest fishing vessels out of "T" Wharf, - The "Mary Emerson," "Vesta," "Rose Standish," "Minerva" and "Galatea." One winter in December, Al and John were anchored in Saquish and it was blowing hard from the N. W. They both had a trip of fish and started for Boston. They reached Minot's and tacked the "Mary Emerson." She had so much ice on the portside, the rail was in the water. They had to shorten sail and work up to Boston. They were lucky it did not capsize. During the '98 storm, the "Vesta" was laying fast to the Pavilion Wharf at Plymouth Beach. Al looked out and saw a house coming at them in the air. He cut the rope and hoisted the jib and ran for the head of the harbor. A tidal wave came over the beach and drove the "Vesta" up into the field side of Litchfield's yacht which had been hauled up for the winter. They had to be launched to waters edge. Capt. Ed Watson had the lobster smack the "Storm King." Grandfather Benson went with him, taking lobsters to Boston. My mother, then about 12 years of age, wanted to make the trip with them. She steered the vessel while they warped it through the drawbridge. They took the lobsters out and she looked in the well, saw the holes in the bottom of the vessel and would not go back in it. Grandfather's brother, Ezra Benson, was engineer on the Plymouth train and he took her home to Plymouth.

During prohibition in the month of January, I took the dory and went to Saquish to get some things I needed. Late in the afternoon, Bill Peterson come down there. I talked with him and he said that he was going to the Island to collect some money due him for taking grain and other things down, but he said that he did not want to go there. I told him to come over and stay at night with me and he said that he would. He did not come before dark and his boat was anchored off the boat-house. About 9 o'clock it started blowing and snowing from the N. E. In the morning, his boat was still there but no sign of him. In the forenoon, the Coast Guard came up from the Gurnet and I told them. They went over to the Island and questioned the fellow there. He said that he left to go aboard his boat. They found his skiff along side the boat-house. How was he going to get aboard with his skiff there? That fellow was in the rum-runners and the farmhouse cellar was full of cans of "Alki." Whether he saw and knew too much or whether he had trouble with that fellow, we do not know. It looked like foul play and about two weeks later, his body came ashore on Cape Cod. It was battered up so badly, they could not tell anything about it.

When Kendrick Tribou was caretaker on the Island, one summer, my nephew, Arthur Hughes, was helping get the hay. One night when they took the cows to the little pond for water, they saw two of the largest watersnakes. Arthur got his gun and shot them. They were copper-bellies and measured about four feet long. How did they ever get down there? I saw the largest black in the little cemetery while picking blackberries. The Watson's raised a lot of hay, and had a baler in the barn to bale up the hay. I have seen the old cat-boat piled up three tier high taking it up to Plymouth.

I had a map drawn with pen and ink of Clark's Island with every plot of land, the area and the one who owned it. I took it up to Pilgrim Hall and gave it to them.

Capt. Nate Watson and wife came down to the Island in April and I went over to the Island after milk. Mrs. Watson told me that the Captain was not feeling well and if I saw a sheet on the corner of the piazza to come over there as Mott's boat was not working and go to Kingston after Dr. Holmes. He came down in his boat and took him to Kingston and he died there.



### SAQUISH

The head-land of the Gurnet  
Pushed out into the sea  
The sun in golden splendor  
Rose beyond majestically.

The crescent beach of Saquish  
All smooth and white and sanded  
Held cradled in its lap the sea  
Where early Pilgrims landed.

A narrow strip of sand and camps  
An ancient fort, some rocks  
The blue and sparkling Cape Cod Bay  
With birds and gulls in flocks.

The narrow rutted home-made roads  
Run winding through low brush  
A rabbit with its funneled ears  
Runs swiftly through the marsh.

The Nancy Hanks house and home  
Once stood upon this land  
Now all that's left of that old home  
Is crumbling rocks and sand.

A pleasant place to spend a day  
A month, a week or year  
An ancient land where red men roamed  
To fish with ancient spear.

Barefoot boys and dogs and jeeps  
Now run where red men run  
The brest works of the ancient fort  
Grow old without a gun.

A hallowed place in history's mind  
Where people rest and talk  
And across the bay in natures gray  
Rests ancient Plymouth Rock.

(By Walter Baltzer - while visiting  
Saquish with Austin Lowell)